

His Own Church Made His Memorial

By A. R. GROH.

NOT many men can look upon their own memorials or monuments while they are still in the full vigor of life.

But that is the privilege of Rev. Dr. Robert L. Wheeler of the South Side. Dr. Wheeler is a vigorous, every-busy pastor. He is pastor of his own memorial church, a splendid \$50,000 edifice of classic design which stands at Twenty-third and J streets.

He has labored in this field for thirty years, building up a strong congregation from practically nothing and erecting the splendid edifice in which it worships.

Of course, he didn't name it after himself. It was named the First Presbyterian church of South Omaha. When South Omaha became a part of Greater Omaha it became necessary to rename the church because there was already one First Presbyterian church in Omaha. Then it was that the congregation, looking upon the tireless labors of its pastor, decided to name the church after him.

So it is the Robert L. Wheeler Memorial Presbyterian church.

If a man ever deserved a memorial Dr. Wheeler does. So says his congregation. He first suggested establishing a church in South Omaha. That was in 1887 and he had come to Omaha to attend the meeting of the general assembly which was held in a little school house where the Union Pacific station, South Side, now stands.

The idea took. Rev. Mr. Wheeler immediately, with characteristic energy, began canvassing the lively little town for members. He "rounded up" a baker's dozen, organized and placed Rev. George M. Lodge in charge. Then he returned to his own charge at Ponca, Neb.

The Rev. Mr. Lodge found South Omaha such a wild and un-Godly place that he gave up his task soon and left the little flock without a shepherd.

When this news reached New York, Dr. John Hall, chairman of the Home Missions board of the Presbyterian church, wrote to Dr. Wheeler asking him to leave Ponca and try to build up the South Omaha church. Dr. Wheeler accepted the burden and arrived in South Omaha with his family in May, 1888. He has been "on the job" ever since.

He soon had plans under way for a church building and the building soon materialized at Twenty-fifth and J streets. This was succeeded by a more pretentious structure at Twenty-second and J streets. And in the course of time, and as a result of labor and patience, the congregation outgrew this building also.

And there stands the beautiful new structure, the Wheeler Memorial, one of the handsomest church edifices in all Omaha. It is of brick and stone with asphalt roof, steam heat, electric lights. It cost \$45,000 and contains a pipe organ that cost \$3,500 besides. It is commodious, beautiful and convenient. It contains a big, completely equipped kitchen, and the Sunday school room can be used for a dining room on the occasions of congregational dinners or when entertaining meetings of the general assembly or other large conventions.

The congregation has grown from thirteen to 565.

Nor has the congregation been content merely

Unique Experience of Rev. Robert L. Wheeler, When the First Presbyterian Church of South Omaha Was Expunged from the Map by the Annexation with Omaha and His Board Renamed the Church in Recognition of His Service

to build up itself. It is a missionating church. It supports and is now finishing a pretty new church building at Forty-ninth and Q streets, where for fourteen years a flourishing mission Bible school has been maintained.

For activity Dr. Wheeler makes the proverbial "cranberry merchant" look like an ordinary loafer. He is busy all the time. Neither rain, snow, heat or cold can stop him. He is a good example of the fallacy of the popular idea that "all a minister has to do is preach two sermons a week." Unless you have an appointment you aren't likely to find him at home when you call. He's out visiting the sick or burying the dead or calling on his parishioners or engaged in some other of his multitudinous duties.

Many of these duties are self-imposed. For example, his preaching and offering prayer over the bodies of friendless dead. One day, some years ago, he saw a body of "one more unfortunate" being chucked into a pine box to be hauled out and put in the ground without benefit of clergy.

He immediately called a halt on the impromptu funeral. He conducted services over the body and then he made public his desire to conduct services over the bodies of all poor and friendless persons who had no one to perform that service. There is no charge for it, either. He has conducted the funerals of sixty-four suicides since he came to South Omaha.

Whenever anyone speaks to Dr. Wheeler about the good work he has done, he invariably plucks a large verbal bouquet and throws it gracefully in the direction of his wife. They were married in 1876 back in his boyhood home, Watkins, N. Y.

"My devoted wife has been a most capable aid all these years," says Dr. Wheeler. "Her patience, devotion to the church, gracious quality of peace and good-will to all, and native sense of attending strictly to her own affairs, has been of incalculable blessing."

Dr. Wheeler's activities for the public welfare extend to many channels. Once he was nominated for congress and almost won the race. He was in the forefront of the fight to provide food for the

REV. ROBERT L. WHEELER - D.D.

striking packing house employes and their families several years ago. He has taken active interest in upbuilding the public library and was one of the organizers of the South Omaha Hospital association. And in many lines of charitable work he has led.

He is an interesting and forceful speaker with a lively sense of humor and a firm grasp of a great many subjects.

Augustus Caesar boasted, "I found Rome a city of brick; I have made it a city of marble." Beautiful Rome was a memorial of Augustus.

Dr. Wheeler found his church not even a church of brick. It was a church of nothing in a material way and mighty little in a personal way. He has made it a church of stone and marble and of 565 people.

Any wonder his congregation feels that he deserves a memorial?



THE ROBERT L. WHEELER MEMORIAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH SOUTH SIDE

